



Round Table: Women's Activism and Participation in Lebanon

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Women's Activism and Participation in Lebanon was the subject of a round table discussion held at the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World last October. The participants were Lina Abou Habib, Iqbal Doughan, Linda Matar, Mona Khalaf, Zoya Rouhana, and Dima Dabbous-Sensenig. The moderator was Marguerite Helou.

Marguerite Helou: The subject of our round table is "Women's Activism in Lebanon." Based on your experience, is there a difference between women activists and women participants, and when can we call a woman an activist and when can we call her a participant in the public sphere?

Linda Matar: In order to answer this question I would like to know what are the criteria you are using to measure participation. In other words, what do you mean by participation? Is it mere participation in activities organized by non-governmental organizations or demonstrations; or is the participant the initiator who organizes the activities? How do you define an activist, the person who organizes the event, and who is the participant, the one who participates by the mere fact that she got invited?

MH: This is what we are trying to find out. We have no

set definition. We are hoping to come up with one once this round table is over. So basically my question is: In your opinion who qualifies to be an activist? And how is an activist different from a mere participant? What are the criteria we must use to make this distinction? Does it have to do with initiative, volunteering, or level of participation?

LM: There are two categories of participants. The first group is made up of women whose participation is generally sporadic and restricted to specific activities, either because of personal choice or due to lack of time. Members of the second group are more involved. Their participation is more the active rather than the passive type. Their involvement is permanent and they are active at all levels. This group – or at least a significant number of them – can be considered activists. They initiate activities, are highly devoted to the cause, and usually volunteer on a full time basis.

Defining activism and participation is very difficult because there are degrees of participation and activism. Some women may be considered active participants by the mere fact that they are present. Others are regarded as participants because they are involved in the discussions, sug-

gestions, and recommendations taking place. Hence, the degree of participation of these two groups is not the same; it differs with the commitment demonstrated. If a woman constantly participates in women's activities and has a positive impact in terms of her suggestions and opinions then I think you can consider her sort of an activist. An activist in my opinion is a woman who has volunteered to serve and be active in the fight for women's rights. No matter how difficult the task is, she plunges in and tries to overcome the difficulties. Some women believe in the cause and are convinced that their input can make a difference. However, there are others who only care about personal exposure and visibility. There are many whose sole aim is to be seen. If they don't get the chance to sit in the front rows they leave.

Zoya Rouhana: Before I answer could you clarify more what you mean by activism and participation?

MH: I am going to propose a simple basic distinction between the two concepts to start with. Activism entails advocacy, strife, and volunteering. It aims at changing the prevalent situation in society. As an activist, I may not be directly suffering from discrimination but I am conscious of what is going on around me and I strive to change the situation by working to help others. I am working for the future to improve society as a whole. Participation, on the other hand, may not entail advocacy, taking initiatives – or at least it is not consciously intended to change the situation. Voting is one such type of participation.

ZR: I agree with what you said. I believe that participation has its reasons and considerations. I guess the word participation in a way diminishes the effort put in by women. Why should we differentiate between an activist and a participant?

Lina Abou Habib: In my opinion we are talking about different degrees of participation where activism is the utmost level of participation. It is important to highlight what you are participating in and what you are actively advocating. If we take Casablanca as an example, a million women participated in a demonstration that opposed the amendments of laws. Women were demonstrating against equality. So basically both participation and activism are for change, yet, this change need not lead to a positive change for women. As a concept, participation has degrees and the highest levels of participation yields activism.

Iqbal Doughan: There are different degrees of activism and participation, yet, if we have a goal to change certain issues in society then all the individuals working on this subject ought to be a team. I believe that an activist is a person who is committed to a particular cause and considers it a top priority where it occupies a huge part of her

life. However, I also believe that those who participate with her and assist her in her strife are also activists. Activists and participants both participate, yet the time and effort exerted by them differ because participants do not really have the time that activists have. That is why we see less and less young women activists given that they lack the time needed to volunteer. Hence, the levels of participation differ and the activist is the one who devotes all her life to a particular issue. Some participate in terms of their presence, others in preparing and putting forth a plan of action and strategy, etc. So some participants will turn into activists, but not all of them will. However, all activists will pass through the phase of participation where they train, learn, and gain experience to participate on some level. I believe that the more committed they get the more they are fit to be called activists.

ZR: A distinction should be made between women who are working and striving to make a qualitative and real difference in women's lives and those who work for charitable or superficial reasons.

ID: Not all participation is charitable, there are some social aspects related to participation. Women volunteers working with the elderly and striving to improve their situation are bringing about a positive change, and hence can be considered social activists. Nowadays, we shy away from any charitable act and refuse to consider it activism. I believe those are activists in society, they are sacrificing their time and mobilizing their efforts for various causes. They fill in a gap where there is negligence.

MH: Is there a difference between the activists that were working during the independence period and the activists of today? Were they activists without passing through the phases of participation and training?

LM: A lot of the non-governmental organizations at that time were accused of being made up of women who belonged to the high society. The reason behind this was because many of the women who started working socially were well to do, bourgeois ladies who weren't involved in any political work. Most of them had the time and means and were members of organizations that were engaged in social activities such as illiteracy eradication, etc. Their participation was seasonal and periodical. At that time women were allowed to engage in social and charitable activities but politics was a field relegated to men. Yet when the need arose, those same women took to the streets in the fight for Lebanon's independence. Women from different areas, religions and organizations united, demonstrated and clashed with the occupying army. Even though these women recoiled from the word politics and refused to engage in any political activity, they were unconsciously very politically active and involved



when they joined men in the fight for liberation. The fact that they demonstrated for independence was neither a charitable act nor a social one – it was a purely political act. Once independence was gained, those women retreated because they thought that with independence they would gain their full rights. Shortly after, they realized that that was not the case. However, there were certain women figures who played an important role in granting women their political rights, such as Ibtihaj Kaddoura, Laure Tabet, Emily Fares Ibrahim to mention a few. I remember when I joined the League of Lebanese Women's Rights, even though I was young and new in the field of politics, I knew that every social action or work to be realized needed to be backed by a political decision. So the question here is aren't we really involved in politics? This was the general trend.

Mona Khalaf: Which years are you talking about?

LM: 1976

MK: But in 1948 women were very much involved politically and denounced the occupation of Palestine. Those women went to Egypt and the Arab Women's League was formed under the leadership of Huda Shaarawi. The first pioneers had an upper hand because they were activists in the real sense of the word. They paved the way for us. In the early 1900s you were sometimes imprisoned because you were an activist. Back then there was no backup from the United Nations, there was no Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, no UN convention renouncing violence, no support from men or politicians, etc. Women were accused of importing Western values.

MH: Is the level of backup women receive related to the issues they are fighting for?

Lina Abou Habib: There is no doubt that the Beijing conference was a turning point. How things deviated over the years is something else. Yet, the international agenda does influence which issues and women's concerns are prioritized.

MH: When women participated in the fight for Lebanon's independence the whole society approved and encouraged them, yet when women started to ask for their political, social and economic rights there was disapproval. Is the level of acceptance and backup provided linked to the issue one is fighting for?

LAH: Yes, it is related but it is a double edged sword. The more important the issue, the more it is fought. If you can find support for an issue that does not mean that it is important for everyone.

Dima Dabbous-Sensenig: When women are fighting for a cause that benefits men or coincides with their interest it's ok because women can be used to take to the streets when they are needed. However, men expect them to go back home, sit aside and attend to matters in the private sphere when the goal is achieved. Hence, when she is needed she is used and after she helps out she is put on the side and robbed of all her privileges. So I strongly believe that when the goal is relevant and convenient to men, women are encouraged to take part but when they start working on something that would benefit them as women they are fought and discouraged. Men usually use everything in their power to fight women, especially religion.

ID: That is why we should try to link men's issues to ours. The social security law is a good example. We worked for over 25 years to secure social security for children through their mothers. We were calling for the right of women to be considered breadwinners. We encouraged men to join in our plight given that the amendment of this law would benefit men. And in fact, husbands started backing us because they realized that they are ameliorating the situation of the family given that they and their children were the primary beneficiaries. Mind you, not all issues can be won this way but we have to try. I believe that it is very important to raise men's and boys' awareness of and belief in women's rights.

LM: I agree with what they said, yet I would like to add something: No matter how important the cause is for you it does not have the same weight – not only for men, but for other women as well. Women sometimes fail to support other women in their plight. Some women are convinced to stay at home and have men spend on them. So we need to enlighten men and women and the youth.

LAH: I agree, given that the ultimate aim is to change the power structure and this is very difficult to alter because men will not renounce their privileges easily. There is a very interesting study conducted by Elizabeth Thompson entitled *Colonial Citizens* in which the author studies the formal and informal women's movement in Lebanon and Syria. According to her, the regression of the women's movement after independence has to do with the fact that men decided to relegate women back to the private sphere. Even in terms of publications the gap is very wide. It is not a coincidence that women were used.

MK: No one mentioned the war Lebanon passed through. There was a momentum of the Lebanese women's movement that stopped as a result of the war. Society usually views women as the ideal candidates to take care of the hungry, the wounded, etc. There was an agenda for the women's movement, yet it had to stop during the war. No

one was interested in giving women their rights because there were other priorities at the societal level. So women's issues were more or less ignored for 20 years and until about two years before the Beijing conference. So women's issues were not a priority. Of course there were individuals who were actively participating in the fight, but on the societal level there was no interest.

LM: I don't believe that the starting point was the Beijing conference but rather 1975, International Women's Day, because it was an important event for both the developing countries as well as the whole world. We used to say that the country comes first and then every other issue. Lebanon was represented in all the international conferences even though there was war. We were actively engaged in organizing conferences and seminars even though the war was raging.

MH: If we are to take the war period, we find that there was societal, regional and confessional acceptance of women's participation and activism. Women demonstrated, fought and worked. After the war women were asked to go back home.

MK: I disagree. Women didn't actually fight and we can't compare Lebanese women to Palestinian or Algerian women. Women were a support group but they weren't active participants in the war.

LAH: Women did participate in the siege of the camps. They were participants and were a support group.

MH: Why did you become activists? What triggered your interest?

DDS: Given that I was an only girl I wanted my father to love me more than my brothers so I used to compete with them and wanted to prove to my father that I was equal to them, so whatever they did I wanted to do. Besides, I got involved in women's issues for personal reasons mostly related to my first marriage that ended in divorce.

My personal interest developed and triggered my academic interest in women's issues. I realized that when one is armed with education one has knowledge, can think and solve one's problems. Because I was discriminated against I relate to women who are discriminated against. Academically I can now comprehend the reasons why women accept their fate. To me an activist differs from a participant in that the former has the political knowledge, know how and maturity. Political consciousness gives one an agenda that enables one to analyze the problem and come up with a solution based on experience, political thinking and education. When you tell the participant that it is important for women to attain most of their rights,

she might not fully comprehend all the aspects this involves. However, if I am an activist I am able to know exactly why men act this way and why they discriminate against women, and why they don't want them to work. Work leads to empowerment and independence, which in turn strengthens one's personality. I used to know that what was happening to me was wrong instinctively, yet, when I got more involved academically I was able to understand why. When one is in an abusive relationship one feels very weak and vulnerable. Abusive men rob women of all their privileges because they know that this is the only way they can control and terrorize them.

ID: Just like Dima, I was brought up with six other brothers. I was the only girl and had special treatment from everyone in my family. My brothers supported me a lot. When I was 13, I joined a political party. This political party taught me how to be disciplined, work in a group, think, and become a planner. It also influenced the formation of my personality. I remained a party member until I got married. I had to quit my political work because of family issues. Yet I still felt the need to improve the situation of women. Since a young age I was interested in working on women's issues and I believe that as long as the personal status codes discriminate against women nothing will change. Hence, we are trying to amend the discriminatory laws in the Lebanese legislation.

I strongly believe that women who work are more capable of changing their situation. They are capable of making decisions on their own. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the situation of women has improved, the ingrained habits of the mind are still the same and so are the stereotypes and discriminatory laws; they hardly go away or change. As a result we decided to found the Working Women's League in Lebanon. The purpose was to ameliorate the situation of working women by encouraging them to unite and join syndicates. We realized that women working outside the home are more eager to change things than women who are at home. We faced many difficulties at first in terms of logistics, funds and attitudes. A major problem we still suffer from is shortage of funds given that most of the funding we get is conditional. We try to manage with our own resources but that is not easy. Besides, stereotypes prevail when one is fighting for women's rights. Women are ridiculed and constantly criticized when they ask for their rights. For example, once a politician made fun of the fact that we were trying to incorporate a clause related to sexual harassment in the labor law.

MH: To what extent are women politicians working on women's issue?

ID: MP Nayla Mouawad and MP Bahia Hariri have worked



a lot and they support us in all our requests. Yet, there are a lot of women in decision-making positions who are not interested in women's issues or in advancing the situation of women.

MK: It is our fault. We should be more involved and plan ahead of time if we are interested in being elected. We should start working from now if we want to participate in the 2009 elections. We should start formulating a plan of action and publicizing our electoral program. Most essential is that we should work as a team and support each other. We should back those among us whom we think would represent us well. I disagree that men are not allowing us to enter politics; we are not helping ourselves.

ID: The electoral system is not helping either. Let's face it. I agree we are not working hard to pursue our rights but the system doesn't help.

LAH: The basic reason I got interested in women's issues was Auntie Georgette. She was a neighbor and a very good friend of my grandmother. Every two days she would flee to our house because her husband used to beat her up. We were young and didn't comprehend what was happening. But we knew something was wrong given that Auntie Georgette always fled to our house with torn clothes, bruised and crying. She would hide in our house and it was a traumatizing experience to see her in such a state. Given that the beatings were recurrent we sensed the discrimination early on. Also when you attend a convent school you either try to abide by the system or rebel. One thing I wanted for my daughter was to put her in a nonreligious school.

MK: I too am an only girl. I was very fortunate to have three fantastic men in my life: my father, my husband and my son. I went to a convent school and then attended the American University of Beirut. Yet, I do not feel that the convent school affected me negatively; because with time I succeeded in sorting out the values I was taught. I grew up in a family where I never felt discriminated against. My father treated me and my brothers on an equal footing, except when it came to going out at night. When I graduated from AUB with a B.A. I was offered a job as a research assistant. I was overjoyed so I rushed home to tell my mum. My aunt was visiting when I arrived and after I told them the good news my aunt couldn't help but say, and I still recall her exact words: "God keep your father safe and able to provide you with financial support. In our family, girls do not work." The prevailing mentality at that time was that if you could afford to stay at home then you should not work. Having a university degree at that time was a plus which enabled you to marry well and raise children adequately. My mother never worked and neither

did any of my relatives or people in my milieu so it was a shock to them. When my father came home, I told him about the good news. He was thrilled at the idea and supported me all the way. So ever since I never felt discriminated against. I also majored in Economics, a field that was a man's domain. I recall my professor encouraging me and the other two girls majoring in Economics to shift to Education.

ZR: I am an only girl. I was my father's favorite. I didn't experience any discrimination within my immediate family though my extended family is very conservative and patriarchal. There was a contradiction between the way I was brought up, within my own family and my milieu. I recall that it was the end of the world when girls in the family used to be born.

I got interested in women's issues at an early age. I was a member of the League of Lebanese Women until 1995. A turning point for me was when the Arab Women's Court convened in Beirut. The Court was a forum where women came to testify about the violence they were subjected to. My husband is very supportive and so is my family. The issue of violence against women was a touchy subject and our organization had a hard time getting a permit. We needed five years to get the license from the government because such an issue was considered a family matter. One husband told me: "It's no one's business if I want to throw my wife from the balcony. I can do it and no one has the right to interfere."

LM: My experience is totally different from the others. Since I was young I was very pampered but I was brought up in family that could hardly make ends meet. At every phase in my life I had question marks about so many things. My father was very liberal for his times, he wanted me to choose my spouse when the time came, which according to him was not before 20. But I fell in love and got married at the age of 17 to an Armenian guy against my brother's will. My husband was very supportive.

I could not tolerate discrimination and I will recount one incident that affected me and made me interested in defending women's issues. Prior to 1953, women were not granted the right to vote. During one of the elections I saw our neighbor, who was physically and mentally retarded, being carried to vote. I was outraged because the poor guy knew nothing about what was going on around him and his vote was counted as a valid one whereas I wasn't even allowed to vote. Around that period I was visited by two women roaming around collecting signatures for a petition that called for granting women the right to vote. I signed the petition and asked them if I could join them in collecting petitions and they agreed. In one of the houses there was a lady who told

us, and I quote: "I am not signing anything, I don't want any more rights. I have everything I need. I have all the jewelry I want, I have a car, and I have a maid at home. What do I want more?" Since that day I decided to join the League of Lebanese Women and founded a center in my area. With time I advanced and was elected president of the League and I am still president till this day. I also joined the Communist Party but after I became president of the League I didn't have time for the two so I left the Party.

MH: How flexible were parties in promoting women?

LM: Promoting women in parties stems from women's willingness to invest time. Women sometimes don't have the time to stay late and attend party meetings. Most parties and syndicates hold their meetings at night and this depends on the woman and how much she is willing to participate. No matter how understanding husbands and parents are they will not allow women to stay out very late.

ID: I disagree with you totally Linda, you are trying to give excuses why parties refuse to promote women.

LM: This is your opinion, but when I was a member of the Communist Party they tried to help me advance and give me a top ranking position within the party but I refused because I didn't have the time.

MK: I know two women who wanted to move forward in the Communist Party, yet they were fought and they ultimately left. Each party has a few token women who rarely occupy decision-making positions.

MH: What about personal status codes, are you working on amending these laws?

ID: Religious laws prevent us from adopting a civil law. The personal status codes of all sects agree to discriminate against women. We are trying to amend some provisions within the personal status codes. What we are working on is increasing the child custody age limit. We are finding a lot of difficulty in doing so because religious figures are fighting us. Many Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, and Iraq amended their laws on custody age. Only two sects in Lebanon managed to amend this law and they are the Greek Orthodox and the Evangelicals.

MH: Amending personal status laws is next to impossible. So don't you think that women's activism is condoned as long as it is in conformity with the customs and traditions? When one addresses issues that are outside the scope of what is acceptable all hell breaks loose.

ID: There are issues that may be amended but others that are taboos, such as inheritance. If you decide to touch upon this issue with Muslim clerics you are considered a heretic.

LAH: Patriarchal systems are in favor of personal status codes. Hence, given that we are discriminated against we try to make do with what is available. Even though we might not reach any developments now or in the near future, the struggle has to continue. This should be our aim.

ZR: One has to admit that familial relations are undemocratic, controlling, and authoritarian in nature. Given that these relations are the norm, there is no way society will develop lest these relations become egalitarian. Women are the caretakers and they should enjoy equal opportunities to relay egalitarianism to their children. Activism should adopt as a starting point human rights in general and not just women's rights.

MH: While bringing up their children, women sometimes reinforce the same culture by ascribing to their daughter everything relating to the private sphere.

ZR: We have to acknowledge that there is a prevalent patriarchal culture that is affecting men and women equally. Hence, our fight should be directed towards consciousness-raising to educate both men and women. Women and men are the victims.

ID: I agree with you but it's the woman's cause and women should work harder to attain their rights.

MK: Women are the ones who bring up the children be they boys or girls. It is thus their duty to raise their sons and daughters in a way that would put an end to the stereotyped gender distribution of roles. It is only if they do so that there would be some hope for a positive change in the prevailing norms and traditions.

ID: How can you empower women who have no decision making power at home, who are battered and discriminated against? Even if this woman tries to raise her children in an egalitarian manner she will fail because she has no influence over her children. The children will be influenced by the father and learn what is right and wrong from him.

LAH: When you say the solution is in raising awareness and the target group is women, one is under the impression that women are the problem and this is not the case. I agree that raising awareness is very important but the focus should be on both genders not just women.